

Natick 360



Strategic Options

June 8-10, 2007
Kennedy Middle School
1 Phillip J. Lucier Dr.
Natick, Massachusetts 01760

Ver. 4.1, June 6, 2007

Natick 360
Honoring Our Past. Planning Our Future.



Strategic Options
Strategic Options Workshops
June 8-10, 2007 * Kennedy Middle School

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Strategic Options Workshops

June 8-10, 2007 * Kennedy Middle School

Introduction

The Natick 360 strategic planning process is about the Town's aspirations, its Vision for the Future that the public helped create during last October's Values & Vision Workshops (see page 2, below). At the Strategic Options Workshops, June 8-10, you will be asked to let us know what is important to you, and what your priorities are for Natick's future.

Following the unanimous acceptance of the Values and Vision statements by the sponsoring Town boards and committees, an extensive series of workshops with the boards and committees, the public, and representatives of the Natick business community was undertaken in order to better understand the gap between the vision of the future and the Natick of today. An additional series of workshops focused on suggested strategies to bring Natick closer to the articulated vision. The strategic options listed below are the product of those deliberations.

This document was reviewed and approved by the five boards and committees that sponsor *Natick 360*, but the options listed are not recommended or endorsed by the Sponsoring Boards. These options are presented solely to ask members of the public their opinions. Many of the ideas in this document have been in public discussions before; others are new ideas. In general, they represent the best thinking about possible solutions to the issues facing Natick, and the boards and commissions want to hear from the public what it thinks about these ideas.

Achieving Natick's vision will not be easy. The Town's budget cannot support current-level services, much less the improvements and expansions needed to move toward Natick's Vision. This situation will continue for a long time, no matter how much the Town grows. Somehow, we need to find a balance between our aspirations and the realities of our financial condition. We invite you to take a first step in making a brighter future for Natick through your participation in these workshops.

Natick 360

Natick 360 is a long-range planning process sponsored by the Board of Selectmen, School Committee, Finance Committee, Planning Board, and Conservation Commission.

The process will result in the production of a Strategic Plan which will be proposed to Town Meeting.

This process seeks input from the public to prioritize a list of strategic options. It is important to note that:

A) By floating some of these options to test public response, the Sponsoring Boards are not endorsing these options,

B) This list of options presented here is not necessarily complete or exhaustive,

C) This strategic planning process does not replace any process or authority which is the purview of any of the elected boards or committees as defined in the Town of Natick Charter or By-laws.

Natick 360

Honoring Our Past. Planning Our Future.



Natick Value and Vision Statements¹

As citizens of Natick, we value:

- Natick's "small-town" sense as a safe, interconnected community fed by its heritage, pride and spirit of volunteerism, and by its diversity, derived from its tradition of affordability and welcoming nature;
- Natick's stewardship of its diverse open spaces, and natural resources;
- A high-value education for students at all levels and abilities, and continuing educational opportunities for all Natick citizens;
- A variety of businesses that create a wide range of jobs and provide support to the community in many ways;
- Natick Center, a vibrant focal point of our community;
- Natick's abundance of cultural, recreational and educational facilities, wide array of municipal services, and proximity to major transit and transportation resources that contribute to our high quality of life.

As citizens of Natick, we aspire to create a future in which:

- Natick is a healthy community of diverse and interconnected citizens, businesses, organizations and neighborhoods, where citizens of all ages, backgrounds and income levels can live, work and thrive;
- Natick's natural resources are preserved and accessible to the community;
- Natick Center is the vibrant core of the community, a unique and accessible destination for commerce, community and culture, day and night;
- Natick's public schools and programs are recognized as among the best;
- Natick's self-government, supported by informed and engaged citizens, is fiscally sound, delivers services efficiently and communicates effectively with the public;
- Natick's public infrastructure and buildings fulfill their function efficiently and effectively to the satisfaction of the community, and are maintained in good working order;
- Natick is a desirable and accessible destination that marshals local and regional partners and resources to solve problems and enhance the quality of life for all its citizens.

¹ Note: Value and Vision Statements are in random order. No prioritization is implied.

TOWN ADMINISTRATOR BUDGET MESSAGE – FISCAL YEAR 2008

By Martha L. White, Acting Town Administrator

This budget message provides a financial context for evaluating the plans and programs outlined in the *Natick 360* documents. It highlights the FY 2008 budget, recommendations by the Finance Committee and the significant financial challenges the community will face in coming years.

Revenue Update

Current revenue projections for FY 2008 total \$110,242,741.

State Aid

Earlier projections anticipated a modest 3.25% increase in state aid above FY 2007. Despite public statements promising 5% increases, the Governor's FY 2008 budget actually proposes a \$12,533 *decrease* for Natick. Recently, the outlook for state aid has brightened: the House Ways and Means Committee's budget proposes net state aid for Natick to increase 5% over FY 2007 levels.

In FY 2003 state aid allocations fell precipitously. In response, many communities, Natick included, began to rely heavily on reserves (savings) and one-time revenues to balance their operating budgets. They hoped the state would quickly restore its commitment to local governments, and that the negative impact on municipal budgets would be short-lived. Such was not to be the case. Only in FY 2008 is state aid anticipated to reach FY 2002 levels, but the value of that amount is far less than its value six years ago, after inflation and other factors.

Taxation

The benefits from real estate and personal property taxes attributable to substantial Natick Mall commercial and residential project will not be realized until FY 2009 and FY 2010. In FY 2008, we anticipate approximately \$1 million in supplemental taxation as the commercial units are occupied.

Expenditure Update

The January balanced operating budget projected total revenues of \$109,328,473. With significant projected increases in fuel, energy, health care and contractual labor costs, this revenue projection normally would have necessitated personnel and program reductions, including for public safety, education, social services, public works, administrative services and more. The School Department felt that such reductions would reverse many recent positive accomplishments, and requested an increase of \$2.87 million, or about \$1.7 million more than in the January budget. This amount could not be funded within projected revenues, so the former Town Administrator recommended that the Board of Selectmen call for a Proposition 2½ Override election for additional School Department funding.

Proposed FY 2008 Budget

The Finance Committee reviewed the budget rigorously. This process revealed that several municipal departments are significantly challenged to meet the community's growing needs, and that cuts necessitated by the proposed FY 2008 budget would jeopardize the high quality services currently enjoyed throughout Natick. The Finance Committee recommended that a Proposition 2½ Override election *not* be called at this time; instead, it recommended that additional one-time revenues and reserves should be used to balance the FY 2008 budget.

The Finance Committee's proposed FY 2008 budget provides additional funds for the School Department (\$1.65 million more than the January budget) and for General Government (\$300,000 more than the January budget). The strategy for balancing this proposed FY 2008 budget—using reserves and one-time revenues—cannot be sustained. The community will face difficult decisions in FY 2009 and beyond regarding the need for substantial additional revenues through a Proposition 2½ Override just to maintain existing service levels.

Most people would agree that ongoing operating expenses should be fully supported by reliable, recurring revenues. Paying for ongoing operating expenses with one-time or reserve funds is akin to paying your electric bill from your savings account with no assurance that you will be able to replenish those savings. Eventually the savings will be gone, but the electric bills will continue. A sounder strategy would be to anticipate these budgetary challenges, reduce expenses where possible, and enhance ongoing revenues where possible to meet ongoing expenses.

The proposed FY 2008 operating budget would use \$4.2 million from Free Cash, the Stabilization Fund and the Overlay Surplus to pay ongoing expenses; this could be characterized as a budget that exceeds ongoing available revenue by \$4.2 million.

Free Cash Balance

More alarming is the resulting status of these funds now that the FY 2008 budget has been approved. Free Cash is the money left over from the previous year's operations. Virtually all Free Cash is proposed to be used up in FY 2009. Some Free Cash will likely be replenished at the end of the fiscal year, but we cannot predict now how much.

The Massachusetts Department of Revenue recommends that:

A community should maintain a free cash balance to provide a hedge against unforeseen expenditures and to ensure there will be an adequate reserve to prevent sharp fluctuations in the tax rate. Maintenance of an adequate free cash level is not a luxury but a necessary component of sound local fiscal management. Credit rating agencies and other members of the financial community expect municipalities to maintain free cash reserves and make judgments regarding a community's fiscal stability, in part, on the basis of free cash.

An unofficial target for unappropriated Free Cash Balance (the balance remaining after all appropriations) is at least 0.5 percent of general fund revenues, or about \$551,000 for Natick. Our current free cash balance, after approval of the FY 2008 budget, is \$108,789.

Stabilization Fund Balance

The Stabilization Fund balance prior to approval of the FY 2008 budget was \$3.4 million; approval of the budget brought the balance down to \$3.2 million. The National Advisory Council on State and Local Budgeting recommends keeping Stabilization Funds for temporary cash flow shortages, emergencies, unanticipated economic downturns and one-time opportunities. Natick used Stabilization Funds appropriately in response to what was hoped would be a temporary cut in state aid in FY 2003, but continuing to use these funds is contrary to the standards. Many communities have a Stabilization Fund target of 5% of general fund revenues; for Natick, this target would suggest a balance of \$5.5 million, or \$2.3 million more than currently available.

Overlay Surplus Balance

The FY 2008 budget used virtually all Overlay Surplus funds. Within each fiscal year, an Overlay Reserve account is established to fund property tax abatements and exemptions; once these have been resolved, the remaining funds may be declared by the Board of Assessors as Overlay Surplus. Typically the Overlay Surplus is released incrementally, and is often used for capital outlays or other one-time expenses. For FY 2008, the Assessors were asked to, and did, release all potential Overlay Surplus from FY 2006 and earlier, limiting use of this funding source in future years until it is replenished.

In summary, Natick's *initial* use of reserves in response to the abrupt FY 2003 cut in state aid was a sound decision, but *continued* use of these resources has put the Town in a precarious and unsustainable financial position. The Town Administrator and Finance Committee have warned of this eventuality the last three years. Natick's savings are nearly gone, but the bills will continue to arrive.

Future Years Outlook

The former Town Administrator, in his January 2007 budget message, advised that:

In order to continue the current level of services we will need to seek additional revenue sources in FY 2009. If that is not requested or approved by the citizenry then we must plan to strategically downsize our operations. We have a very short period of time to determine what is at risk and to educate the general public as to their choices. We must utilize the next year to make some decisions regarding the level of services this government will offer the citizens of Natick.

Our challenges over the coming months are many: we must ensure efficiency and cost-effectiveness in our delivery of services, refine projections for expenditures and revenues, and educate the public about the budgeting process and the community's short and long-term financial challenges.

Many positive efforts are underway or planned, including

- Analysis of joining the state's Group Insurance Commission for employees' health care (requires state legislation);
- Assessing opportunities to improve energy use in buildings and facilities;
- Working with Natick's Retirement Board to improve investment returns, and advocating for legislation that would allow the State to take over investment of these funds;
- Working with key local boards—Selectmen, School Committee and Finance Committee—to establish a policy framework for future financial decisions;
- Reviewing departmental fees to maximize these revenue opportunities;
- Creating a transparent, timely, reliable and realistic capital planning and funding process;
- Evaluating the impact of joining the new Regional Transit Authority;
- Evaluating other regional service opportunities.

Our best efforts will not overcome the budgetary shortfall that the community will face in FY 2009. While the \$4.2 million gap between projected recurring revenues and the proposed FY 2008 budget can be closed using one-time revenues and reserves, these funds will not be available at this level in FY 2009. Over the coming months, financial projections, service impacts, taxpayer impacts and more will be analyzed and communicated to the community as we look towards the challenge of the FY 2009 budget. I look forward to working with the Selectmen, Finance Committee, other boards and commissions, and the community to meet this challenge.

Explanation of Strategic Options Costing

The following sections contain a list of Strategic Options that the various elected Boards and Committees might pursue to move Natick closer to its long-range vision. The sections are organized into seven strategic focus areas. Within each strategic focus area, there are a list of goals and an illustrative list of actions that might be taken to achieve the goals.

For each action, a rough cost-estimate has been developed. These cost estimates are simply an “order-of-magnitude” cost estimate that has been developed by Town Staff. The cost estimates are organized into the following categories:

Cost Category	Estimated Cost Range	Estimated Annual Cost per Average Household per Year	Assumptions
A	\$0 to \$10,000	\$0	These actions may fall into one of the following categories: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The incremental cost is less than one penny per household per year • The action utilizes existing resources • The action is a lobbying effort to influence state resources
B	\$10,000 to \$100,000	\$0-\$10	These actions usually require some incremental expenses or consulting contracts that are less than \$100,000.
C	\$100,000 to \$1,000,000	\$10-\$74	These actions may require larger consulting contracts or hiring of staff.
D	Greater than \$1,000,000	> \$74	These are usually capital projects or very large changes in levels of services. Some capital projects will be much larger than \$1,000,000 in which case the per household amount will be considerably higher than \$74. We make note of those in the document.

Costs per average household per year are the estimated tax impact of the action on the average household (average value of a single-family resident is \$493,400). All incremental costs in these strategic options are assumed to be funded through an override and therefore the estimated household costs would be the approximate range of annual additional taxes on properties with an assessed value of \$493,400. Properties with an assessed value higher than this would experience higher costs while properties with an assessed value lower than this would experience lower costs.

This process is not an override vote and therefore your responses will not automatically affect property taxes in the town. This process is gathering information from the community about their perceptions of relative priorities. The information will be presented to the School Committee, Board of Selectmen, Finance Committee, Planning Board, and Conservation Commission for their consideration as they finalize a strategic plan for the community. No action to raise property taxes can be undertaken without a formal override vote in a public election in the community.

1. Continuous Improvement of Public Education

Introduction

Natick's public school system includes five elementary schools, two middle schools and one high school. Natick Public Education is very good overall, with high test scores, high graduation rates and a high percentage of graduates going on to college, compared to most school systems in the state and the region.

Note from the School Committee:

We are most grateful for this community list of strategic options. It will provide a valuable perspective as we look at potential policies in detail, put them in context, and weigh them against other priorities and mandates. As you read the options, please remember that not everything on the list has been endorsed, or even discussed, by the School Committee. Remember, too, that some of the items on the list may not be not as important as the many items, some of them mandated, not on the list.

Thank you for your help with Natick 360, and please stay involved – especially in the School Committee process in which these options and others are debated and voted. We welcome your participation!

-- The Natick School Committee

Current Situation

Natick Schools produce well-educated young adults prepared to make their way in the world. Natick schools rank in the top quartile among public school systems nation-wide, and Natick High School ranks in the top decile.

Natick schools are not without challenges. They continuously strive to improve academics, community engagement, school facilities, and program enhancement resources in an environment where funding for these types of improvements are limited due to other non-controllable operational cost increases.. Improvements could add to the quality and to the cost of the Natick school system. Natick schools parents typically have relatively high incomes and 70 percent are college graduates; with these demographic characteristics, they have greater expectations for Natick schools than parents in many other towns.

Expectations are for schools with excellent, highly-trained, professional teachers working with small groups of students, offering a wide variety of subjects and addressing the needs of students of all abilities. They want high-performing schools with technology commensurate with the norm in homes and offices.

The 54-year old Natick High School's supporting infrastructure is in deteriorating condition. It has been kept operating with a great deal of support by a dedicated maintenance staff and expenditure of emergency funding. The school's design and systems are energy-inefficient, not up to ADA standards, and completely inadequate to serve the needs of the community. It is not well-suited to deliver the curriculum of today or tomorrow.

Other schools in the system, too, will need significant upgrades in the next five years. Kennedy Middle School, Memorial School, and Johnson School first among them.

Issues, Gaps and Barriers to Achieving the Vision

The fundamental gap facing Public Education is the distance between expectations within the community for educational resources and the funding to pay for those resources.

Strategies

To improve the Natick schools so that they are recognized as among the best, the town might:

- Continue to improve educational outcomes for students at all levels and of all abilities with a wider curriculum, smaller classes, improved professional development for teachers, continued compensation for teachers adequate to attract and retain those of the highest ability, continuous investment in keeping the physical and technical infrastructure functioning well at and up-to-date.
- Increase the engagement between the community and the schools.
- Build a new high school.
- Renovate or update Kennedy Middle School, Memorial School, and Johnson Schools to extend their useful lifetime.

1.a. Continue to improve educational outcomes for students of all abilities at all levels.

Natick schools are always seeking ways to improve educational outcomes. Among the actions suggested during the *Natick 360* process are reducing student/teacher ratios where beneficial, attracting and retaining the best teachers, making changes to curriculum, and exploring e-learning methods.

The strategic options listed here are not necessarily endorsed by any elected or appointed board. Nor are these options necessarily a complete list of the priorities or responsibilities of any elected or appointed board. Natick 360 is advisory only, and is not a replacement for any aspect of the democratic process.

Activity	Cost Category	Est.Cost/ Avg.Hhld./ Year	Assumptions
1. Given current student population, reduce student/teacher ratio where beneficial within constraints of current facilities by adding support staff and/or teacher assistants.	C	\$10-\$74	
2. Given current student population, reduce student/teacher ratio where beneficial by adding teachers and classrooms as necessary.	C	\$10-\$74	
3. Attract and retain qualified teachers and administrators by offering salaries, benefits, and ongoing professional development at levels competitive with surrounding communities.	C	\$10-\$74	
4. Re-engineer core subject areas where necessary to ensure they are taught in a rigorous, challenging way. Costs might include new textbooks, additional staffing, curriculum, or professional development.	B	\$0-\$10	
5. Expand curriculum offerings. For example, offer foreign language in elementary school, offer more languages in middle schools and high school; add orchestra, music theory, engineering, additional business courses, etc.	C	\$10-\$74	
6. Improve educational outcomes by offering supplemental e-learning opportunities, including in professional development.	C	\$10-\$74	

1.b. Increase the communication and collaboration between the school district and the community.

By increasing communications between the schools and the town, the schools would be able to demonstrate the value they bring to the community, and the public may identify ways they can contribute to making the schools better.

Activity	Cost Category	Est.Cost/ Avg.Hhld./ Year	Assumptions
1. Define, identify and periodically provide updates to the community about school performance and school assets; for example: establish and distribute to parents and the community the district-wide plan for integrating curriculum, assessment and professional development; refine and publish elementary and middle school curriculum maps that delineate skills taught in every subject area during the school year.	B	\$0-\$10	Expenses include design, writing, production, printing, and postage costs, possible administrative salary stipends or additional position.
2. Expand communications between the schools and broader Natick community, through newsletters, email, website, cable access TV and other media, to celebrate school accomplishments, demonstrate the value of schools to Natick, identify ways residents can contribute to schools' success, and increase community participation in school activities.	B	\$0-\$10	Expenses include design, writing, production, printing, and postage costs.
3. Explore ways in which local and regional institutions, businesses and community members can mentor, tutor, conduct seminars or provide other expanded or enhanced educational services or offerings.	B	\$0-\$10	Expenses include hiring a volunteer coordinator and training.

1.c. Build a new high school

Natick High School is very old and is not well-designed to meet the needs of a modern curriculum. Therefore, the following actions would replace the existing school. The options are incremental and each builds upon the previous. [Green design and dual use should be separate options, not incremental ones.] The first option replaces the current school with a new one designed for a modern curriculum and integrating modern technology. The second option also includes environmentally-friendly and energy efficient green building design and materials. The third option also includes additional features to support dual use by students and residents. This doesn't include the fourth option.

Activity	Cost Category	Est.Cost/ Avg.Hhld./ Year	Assumptions
1. Build a new high school appropriate for modern curriculum and technology	D	>\$74	
2. Build a new high school appropriate for modern curriculum and technology, using green building design and materials;	D	>\$74	
3. Build a new high school appropriate for modern curriculum and technology, using green building design and materials, and including facilities appropriate for dual-use by students and town residents;	D	>\$74	
4. Establish and keep to a regular capital investment schedule to keep the building in good condition and able to provide an appropriate learning environment. Over the next five years improvements may be needed at Kennedy Middle School, Memorial School, and Johnson School.	C	\$10-\$74	

1.d. Facilitate efforts to secure outside funding for educational enhancements where appropriate

Hire a grants coordinator to maximize outside funding sought by Natick Public Schools.

Activity	Cost Category	Est.Cost/ Avg.Hhld./ Year	Assumptions
1. Hire a grants coordinator to maximize outside funding sought by NPS	B	\$0-\$10	

2. Increasing Civic Engagement and Leadership

Civic engagement is a key element of democracy, and a founding principle of Natick's Town Meeting form of government. Natick's Town Meeting government requires citizens to participate in the election process, voice their concerns and contribute to the public discussion of Town issues.

Current Situation

With a population of about 25,000 adults 18 years and older, nearly 300 Natick residents participate in Town government, including Town Meeting members and participants on boards and committees. Most meetings are sparsely attended, unless an agenda issue affects a specific neighborhood.

About 75% of Natick's adults are registered to vote. In the April 2007 Town election, which had several contested races, turnout was 19 percent of registered voters, about average since 1990. In 2006 the League of Women Voters found that voter turnout has steadily declined from a high of 35% in the early 1980's, and the turnout in state or national elections is four times the turnout for municipal elections.

Some precincts in Natick have issues filling their complement of Town Meeting seats. With the Natick Mall and the Cloverleaf 40B project, Natick will be adding another large residential district which may impact the town's voting precincts and may impact civic engagement if these residential districts are not well integrated with the rest of the community.

More than 500 people participated in the October 2006 *Natick 360* Values and Visioning events, including 327 who attended a session, and nearly 200 who responded to an on-line questionnaire. About two-thirds of these participants were *not* among the 300 members of Town Meeting or on boards and committees.

Issues, Gaps and Barriers to Achieving the Vision

The League of Women Voters reports that many residents perceive local elections as unimportant; consequently, they do not familiarize themselves with candidates' positions and records. The League posits that lack of voter education is a barrier to increasing Natick's relatively low level of participation in local elections.

Part of the voter education process involves educating citizens about the importance of Town government: what the Town can and cannot do, how it is financed, and how residents can affect local decision-making. Residents frequently complain that they do not know when issues are on the Town's agenda, how the Town government resolves issues, and how to make their voice heard. So long as they perceive that Town government does not affect them directly, they pretty much ignore it, but when a neighborhood issue arises, neighborhood networks activate and residents learn about how to participate in the decision-making process.

Strategies

To increase civic engagement and leadership, the Town might engage in three types of activities:

- Improve communications with citizens, to let them know more fully what is going on in the government, in schools and in neighborhoods.
- Increase citizen participation in Town government, by making it easier to serve as a member of a boards or committees, to understand how Town government works, and to register as a voter and then vote

- Integrate residents of new developments and the emerging Rte. 9 business and residential community more fully into the Natick community. These new neighborhoods and businesses can help increase Natick's diversity, and contribute to the rich debate about Natick's public policy issues.

Effects

By increasing the Town's communications with its citizens, residents would better understand the importance of Town government, how it affects their lives and how to participate in decision-making processes.

Providing clearer information about how Town government works and improving board and committee operations, would lead to increased participation and reduce the burden of public service. More participation would likely lead to better decisions.

New residential areas near the Natick Mall and businesses along Rte. 9 are not part of Natick's established networks and neighborhoods. Natick's tradition of welcoming neighbors into the community, targeted to these two groups, could increase the diversity of those participating in civic activities and Town government.

2.a. Improve communications with citizens.

Many citizens are not aware of the different ways the Town government affects them, or when an issue arises, how to participate in the decision-making process. By improving the depth of information and by distributing it better and through more media, citizens will have a better opportunity to learn about their Town government.

Natick publishes a quarterly newsletter, but it is distributed only with property tax bills. Natick's web site is improving all the time, but the public has indicated a desire for even more information. Natick's cable TV channel broadcasts many meetings of boards and committees, but little educational information about current issues or how Town government works. The following activities are ways to improve communications between the Town and its citizens, to ensure that citizens are more fully informed and have expanded access to Town government:

Activity	Cost Category	Est.Cost/ Avg.Hhld./ Year	Assumptions
1. Expand the current quarterly newsletter with information about the Town budget, schools, recreational activities, meetings, progress reports and website resources; distribute newsletter to all Natick homes, whether owned or rented.	B	\$0 - \$10	Could be implemented with part-time consulting assistance and incremental expenses for mailing
2. Improve the Town website, including: services directory, contacts; meeting schedules, agendas, minutes and announcements; public documents; bylaws, zoning and subdivision regulations; registration and payment services; public feedback, questions and ideas; community calendar; bus and train schedules, etc.	C	\$10 - \$74	Could be implemented by adding resources to provide dedicated website management services.
3. Increase use of Natick Town TV (Pegasus), including interviews, discussions of local issues, and educational programs about how Town government works.	A	\$0	Would not require additional Town resources.
4. Increase the use of the library as a depository for Town documents and communications.	A	\$0	Would not require additional town resources
5. Improve customer service by providing customer service training to Town employees.	B	\$0-\$10	Pay for training programs for customer-facing town employees.

2.b. Increase citizen participation in Town government.

While nearly 300 Natick residents participate in Town Meeting or sit on a board or committee, even more participation would likely improve citizen satisfaction with governmental decision-making and decrease “burn-out” for town volunteers. Some Town Meeting seats remain open, as do some seats on boards and committees. Many offices are elected with little competition. Issues affecting a neighborhood frequently generate a crisis response, with little opportunity for understanding of the powers of Town government, its jurisdiction, the required processes, or the alternative solutions available.

Part of the suggested solution is to make boards and committees more communicative and operationally efficient. Another part is to make government processes easier to understand, and more easily accessible. Another element is to encourage voter registration and voter turnout, particularly in low-turnout neighborhoods. Other suggested activities would make the Town government more accessible to working families and to local businesses.

Activity	Cost Category	Est.Cost/ Avg.Hhld./ Year	Assumptions
1. Encourage residents and members of the business community to participate in Town boards, committees and projects.	A	\$0	Would not require additional Town resources.
2. Improve board and committee practices, such as: improving communications; scheduling regular cross-board and committee meetings; adopting ways for residents to participate electronically; supporting changes in open meeting law to accommodate on-line participation.	A	\$0	These incremental costs are below \$10,000 and therefore have a tax impact less than 1 penny per household.
3. Publish and distribute a Town “Owner’s Manual” showing how Town government operates, and opportunities for civic participation.	A	\$0	These incremental costs are below \$10,000 and therefore have a tax impact less than 1 penny per household.
4. Provide information to new residents about citizen participation in Town government; work with “welcoming” organizations and Town Clerk to distribute the information.	A	\$0	These incremental costs are below \$10,000 and therefore have a tax impact less than 1 penny per household.
5. Teach civic engagement concepts to students in middle school and high school.			Cost estimates were not provided for this option.

Activity	Cost Category	Est.Cost/ Avg.Hhld./ Year	Assumptions
6. Encourage voter registration and encourage registered voters to vote.	A	\$0	These incremental costs are below \$10,000 and therefore have a tax impact less than 1 penny per household.
7. Adjust Town office hours to accommodate residents who do not work locally.	A	\$0	These incremental costs are below \$10,000 and therefore have a tax impact less than 1 penny per household.
8. Designate a Town liaison to the Natick business community, to stimulate economic development, strengthen relationships between businesses and schools, and facilitate businesses' interactions with Town government.	C	\$10 - \$74	This would require hiring additional staff (such as an Economic Development Program Manager). If hired, this person could also address issues related to economic development.

2.c. Integrate residents of new developments and the Rte. 9 business community more fully into the Natick community

New Natick neighborhoods are being built as part of the expanded Natick Mall. In addition, there will be a 40B development built at the Cloverleaf Mall. These residential areas may be somewhat isolated from Natick Center and other areas of the Town. By welcoming these residents into the greater Natick community, and inviting them to participate in civic affairs, Natick may help preserve its small town feel.

Similarly, the Rte.9 business community has relatively little contact with the Town. Rte. 9 is a state highway, and the Town has little control over the planning or maintenance of the highway. Yet Natick residents have expressed concerns about this commercial area that cuts through the Town, in many cases restricting travel and commerce north and south. Some of the proposed activities elsewhere in this Strategic Options document call for Natick to engage the State in ways to improve key intersections along Rte. 9. Businesses there will be concerned about these changes. By engaging these businesses before these major issues get to the State's agenda, and developing a more cooperative working relationship between these businesses and the Town, changes to Rte. 9 have a better chance of benefiting both the Town's residents and the businesses along this important road.

Activity	Cost Category	Est.Cost/ Avg.Hhld./ Year	Assumptions
1. Integrate residents of new developments and the Rte. 9 business community more fully into the Natick community.	A	\$0	These incremental costs are below \$10,000 and therefore have a tax impact less than 1 penny per household.

3. Improving Natick's Environment, Health and Safety

Introduction

Natick's environmental resources are very important to its residents. These resources include its lakes and ponds, the aquifer that provides its drinking water, public recreation facilities, and open green spaces ranging from undeveloped forests to manicured parks. Natick residents are also environmentally-aware, and understand environmental impacts on the public's health and safety.

Current Situation

Natick has extensive environmental resources, most of which are in good condition, but development pressures make preservation of these resources difficult. Lake Cochituate is infested with milfoil, a non-native plant that upsets the lake's biological balance. Increasing land values and declining profitability of local farms mean that these resources may come under development pressures. As land is developed, rain water runoff also increases, potentially polluting lakes, streams and the aquifer. Sprawling development brings in more cars, which contribute to the area's air pollution.

Natick's government is sensitive to environmental issues; the Planning Board, Zoning Board of Appeals, and Conservation Commission regulate development in key areas and negotiate for environmental mitigation funds from developers. New public buildings minimize maintenance costs and take advantage of basic energy-saving strategies, but current standards do not meet newer "green" building and development standards. Natick's Town government has begun to take a systemic approach to minimizing its environmental impact, and to gaining the resulting long-term reductions in energy and maintenance costs. One recent example of Natick's investment in this area is ISO certification of Natick's Water Treatment facility.

Development puts pressure on all Town resources. With regard to public safety resources, the Town's current low crime rate and prompt response to emergencies could be threatened by growth-inspired dilution of its police and fire forces.

Like other communities, Natick's population may be aging according to demographic projections. Natick funds some social services that provide help to the elderly and others in our community – particularly working as advocates and advisors to those in need. However, as the senior population expands, further demands may be put upon these services.

Issues, Gaps and Barriers to Achieving the Vision

Development pressures, lack of authority to regulate certain types of development, and lack of financial resources make preserving Natick's natural resources increasingly difficult. Because of the Town's lack of regulated affordable housing, developments proposed under State section 40B (with at least 25 percent affordable housing) are not subject to most local regulations. Limitations on property tax revenue growth (Proposition 2½) restrict the Town's ability to invest in land for open space, and to manage its environmental resources.

Limited funds and lack of new technologies have limited the amount of resources that the Town can focus on its own environmental impacts. While energy efficiency strategies still cost more initially, with paybacks extending over a long term, new techniques and technologies are changing the equation. The strategies are becoming less expensive and more effective, and the rising real costs of energy and maintenance shorten the payback period.

Revenue limitations constrain the Town's ability to grow its public safety resources to meet its property and population growth.

The Town has little capability to affect residents' health directly. It does not operate or fund health services, though it supports social services agencies that advocate for those in need, advise them and provide guidance to the larger network of social service organizations, and provide some direct services.

Strategies

To improve Natick's environment, health and safety, the Town might pursue four types of activities:

- Increase open space and accessibility by acquiring new open spaces, preserving farmlands, and re-considering new powers for environmental protection.
- Reduce impacts on the environment by the Town government, by adopting green building standards, auditing energy use, identifying air pollution sources, and regulating storm water runoff.
- Maintain public safety commensurate with population growth, by increasing police and fire department resources, upgrading a fire station and increasing advance life support capabilities.
- Continue to improve access to health care and social services

Effects

Acquiring additional open spaces and preserving farmlands would enable Natick to hold them in perpetuity, investing its resources for the benefit of current residents and their children for generations. Re-consideration of the Community Preservation Act could provide additional resources to meet environmental, preservation and housing goals.

Reducing the Town's environmental impact would model good environmental management practices, and demonstrate a community commitment to a clean environment. It would also save operational expenses for energy and maintenance, particularly as their real costs increase over time.

By maintaining public safety forces at current levels relative to population, the Town has the potential to preserve its current low crime rate and quick and comprehensive response to emergencies.

While the Town has little power to affect residents' health directly, it should build upon existing efforts to disseminate information that would help residents deal with their own health, behavioral and social services issues.

3.a. Increase open space and accessibility.

The Town has some resources available, from development mitigation payments, transferable development rights, and potentially from grants or other funds. It could use these resources to acquire open space land, or to preserve farmlands.

Voter adoption of the Community Preservation Act could give the Town additional tools and resources to acquire and preserve open space, to create and support affordable housing, to acquire and preserve historic buildings and landscapes, or for land for recreational use. While the community did not support the CPA in elections in 2006, the topic does have some bearing on long-range planning and is therefore included for consideration as part of this process.

Activity	Cost Category	Est.Cost/ Avg.Hhld./ Year	Assumptions
1. Purchase or secure land for open space: parks, recreation areas, trails and environmental protection areas [finance acquisitions using mitigation funds, transferable development rights, grants and Town resources].	D	>\$74	Purchase of land will be very expensive and will most likely be much larger than \$74 per household per year. Open Space funds are available to offset some purchase costs. However, we assume that even with Open Space funds, the tax impact of land acquisition will be above \$1,000,000 and therefore require more than \$74 per household per year.
2. Purchase Agricultural Preservation Restrictions (APR) for local farmlands [finance APR using mitigation funds, transferable development rights, grants, and/or other Town resources].	€ D	>\$74	Purchase of APRs will be very expensive and will most likely be much larger than \$74 per household per year. Open Space funds are available to offset some purchase costs. However, we assume that even with Open Space funds, the tax impact of land acquisition will be above \$1,000,000 and therefore require more than \$74 per household per year.
3. Propose the Community Preservation Act (CPA) for re-consideration by voters.	A	\$0	The cost of putting the CPA in front of the voters in an election is relatively small. These cost estimates do not include the cost of the CPA tax surcharge should the CPA be approved by the voters. Those costs would need to be explained to voters prior to the election that would be held on that topic.

3.b. Reduce impacts on the environment.

Natick has several new building projects potentially on its horizon, such as a new senior/community center, a parking garage, and upgrades or replacement of school buildings, including a new high school. Adoption of “green” building standards, such as LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design), would decrease the environmental impact and increase the efficiency of these projects. While these standards could increase construction costs a bit, they would save energy and maintenance costs over the lifetime of the buildings. If the real costs of energy and maintenance increase, economic payback terms would be shortened.

Continuous monitoring of energy consumption and energy audits would help Natick manage its public buildings and vehicle fleet more efficiently, showing the balance between maintenance tasks and energy costs, and when to replace aging systems or vehicles with newer, energy-efficient models.

Natick’s air quality is fair, better than in Boston, but not the pristine air that long-term residents remember. Natick’s air quality is not monitored regularly, or analyzed to identify the sources of air pollution, so real air quality trends and root causes are not known.

Development increases impervious ground cover, so rain water cannot seep into the ground; instead, it runs off into streams and lakes, picking up soot, oil, fertilizer, chemicals and other pollutants along the way. Streams, lakes and wetlands recharge Natick’s aquifer, the source of its drinking water supply. Some of the runoff also gets into the Town sewer system, flowing in through drains or infiltrating through leaks in sewer pipes. The MWRA sewer treatment facility charges Natick for treating all water in the sewer pipes, so adding rainwater unnecessarily increases sewage treatment expenses. Regulating impervious cover, capping drains and replacing leaking pipes could save the Town money over the longer run.

Activity	Cost Category	Est.Cost/ Avg.Hhld./ Year	Assumptions
1. Consider green building standards for new construction and renovations of Town buildings; train key Town employees and Building Committee members on standards.	A	\$0	These incremental costs are below \$10,000 and therefore have a tax impact less than 1 penny per household.
2. Continuously evaluate the energy efficiency of all Town buildings and vehicles.	A	\$0	These incremental costs are below \$10,000 and therefore have a tax impact less than 1 penny per household.
3. Monitor Natick’s air quality and identify sources of pollutants.	B	\$0-\$10	Would require consulting contract with environmental monitoring firm.
4. Reduce storm water runoff into streams and lakes by regulating impervious cover in residential neighborhoods as well as in commercial areas.	A	\$0	This is a regulatory policy change and would not require extensive Town resources.

Activity	Cost Category	Est.Cost/ Avg.Hhld./ Year	Assumptions
5. Keep storm water runoff out of the sewers, saving unnecessary sewage treatment costs.	D	>\$74	Upgrades to infrastructure to address storm water infiltration will be very expensive.

3.c. Maintain public safety commensurate with population growth

New developments bring more buildings and people under the jurisdiction of the Natick Police, Fire and Emergency Medical Departments. To avoid having police, firefighters and EMT's spread too thinly across the town, reducing coverage and response times, these departments report a need to add personnel as the town's population increases. Of particular concern is the fire station that serves the northwest part of town, where new high-rise buildings are under construction. If the population ages, as some projections show, there may be additional demand for emergency medical services.

Activity	Cost Category	Est.Cost/ Avg.Hhld./ Year	Assumptions
1. Increase police and fire department resources to meet the challenges of a growing and more dense population.	C	\$10 - \$74	Would require hiring of additional public safety personnel.
2. Develop a solution for Fire Station No. 4 to serve the growing population and high-rise buildings in Natick's northwest.	D	>\$74	Solutions to either replace or modify Fire Station No. 4 are very likely in excess of the mitigation funds available from the Natick Mall.
3. Increase advanced life support resources to meet the challenges of an aging population.	C	\$10-\$74	Would require hiring/training of public safety personnel and possibly require reconfiguration of emergency equipment.

3.d. Increase access to health care and social services.

While the Town has little power to affect residents' health directly, it should build upon existing efforts to disseminate information that would help residents deal with their own health, behavioral and social services issues.

Activity	Cost Category	Est.Cost/ Avg.Hhld./ Year	Assumptions
1. Publish and distribute a comprehensive directory of health care and social services available to Natick residents.	A	\$0	These incremental costs are below \$10,000 and therefore have a tax impact less than 1 penny per household.

4. Enlivening Natick Center

Introduction

Natick Center is a Town treasure, where government, transportation, commerce and culture come together. It is home to Town Hall, police and fire stations, TCAN, Morse Institute Library and many churches. Natick Common celebrates the Town's New England heritage, attracting crowds of residents and tourists to special events year-round. Two of the Town's four arterial roadways intersect in Natick Center, and its commuter rail station is a primary link to metropolitan Boston. It houses local businesses and service clubs whose members comprise much of the Town's civic leadership. An emerging arts and cultural center, it hosts galleries and studios, anchored by TCAN, in the historic 1875 firehouse in Natick Center.

Current Situation

Much of Natick Center was built in the last quarter of the 19th century, after a fire leveled most of the Town. Government facilities, built in the 1980's and -90's, recall an earlier architectural tradition and harmonize with other buildings in Natick Center. A few historical buildings are restored, but many are in need of repairs. Some buildings, from the mid-20th Century, are architecturally out-of-character, and are also in need of repairs.

While many Natick Center businesses are successful, some of Natick Center is vacant.. A recurring complaint is lack of parking for workers and shoppers, particularly since the structure failure and subsequent demolition of the municipal parking deck in early 2006 eliminated about 100 parking spaces. Investment in Natick Center is stunted without adequate parking for potential tenants and their customers.

Natick Center housing opportunities are limited. Some historic single-family homes are south and east of the commercial district, but several of these homes are converting to office uses. Natick Center has a limited night-life, with a few restaurants serving dinner, some only on weekends. TCAN attracts more than 20,000 patrons to Natick Center but these visitors walk out onto deserted streets at the conclusion of a show. With little population of downtown residential customers, more diverse offerings—a grocery store or a wider selection of restaurants—are unlikely to emerge.

The Town's Recreation and Parks Department sponsors many community activities on the Common, bringing crowds for daytime special events. TCAN and a few galleries and studios have established a beachhead for an emerging arts and cultural center. TCAN's evening programs bring in evening patrons, who return home after a show due to the lack of additional entertainment venues.

Issues, Gaps and Barriers to Achieving the Vision

Natick Center's unique function—bringing together the key elements of government, transportation, commerce and culture—make it a community focal point. But it lacks the critical mass to achieve its full potential.

A core problem is the lack of parking, which causes potential businesses and customers to stay away from Natick Center. With fewer customers, businesses are less-successful, and building owners have little incentive or resources to invest in restoration.

While Natick's arts and culture community brings people in for evening performances and gallery openings, it is not large enough to draw sufficient crowds that can attract evening-oriented businesses to bring vibrancy after office hours.

Natick Center residences are primarily on its edges, and do not have the numbers to attract businesses that serve residences. Therefore, the types of business offerings downtown are limited primarily to businesses and consumers that spend their workdays downtown.

Strategies

To increase Natick Center's vibrancy and its day-and-night appeal, the Town might engage in three types of activities:

- Provide downtown parking for shoppers, visitors, commuters and employees: recent parking studies show a gap of 440 parking spaces needed to serve Natick Center.
- Increase the diversity and vibrancy of people in and activities downtown, with developments that mix residential, affordable residential, retail, office, restaurant, pub and entertainment uses.
- Increase economic development in Natick Center, by recruiting new businesses, and by marketing Natick Center as a destination for MetroWest arts and culture

Effects

By executing these three key strategies Natick Center could be expected to develop into a more-vibrant core area and extend its vibrancy well into the evenings.

More parking would facilitate customers, and more customers would encourage businesses to fill vacancies and encourage building restoration. Businesses would become more successful and business offerings would become more diverse. Natick Center would develop more vibrancy, and capital investment and property values would increase.

Additional residential development downtown would add to both vibrancy and night-life. A new population of local residents would attract groceries, services, and amenities, further diversifying business offerings.

Downtown economic development activities would fill up vacant spaces, and attract even more customers. By recruiting businesses that complement the emerging arts and culture cluster, Natick could become a regional destination for the arts, bringing in more people from surrounding MetroWest towns. These arts patrons would increase the Town's night-life.

4.a. Provide downtown parking for shoppers, visitors, commuters and employees.

Lack of parking is a deterrent for business development. Building owners are reluctant to restore buildings because potential tenants cannot find parking spaces for their employees. As a result, the area is peppered with vacancies. Some businesses are moving functions out of Natick Center because of the lack of parking. Downtown workers compete with customers for parking spaces. Commuters add to the demand for parking.

The Middlesex garage had about 190 spaces when it was demolished; the remaining vacant land has about 90 spaces, for a net loss of 100 spaces. Parking studies have estimated a shortage of 440 parking spaces beyond the 100 spaces lost at the Middlesex garage.

This strategy presents two alternative ways to provide parking: the Town could build a garage using long-term bond funds, and manage the investment, potentially for a profit, or the Town could work with a private developer to build a garage as part of a mixed-use development that would include public access. The alternatives have different approaches to financing, cost, and differing public benefits.

Activity	Cost Category	Est.Cost/ Avg.Hhld./ Year	Assumptions
1. Build a Natick Center parking garage as a Town-financed and managed investment;	D	>\$74	This would be a large, bonded, capital project. The costs will likely be much higher than \$74 per household per year.
[or]			
2. Encourage a private developer to build a Natick Center parking garage as part of a mixed-use development.	A	\$0	This option would make very limited use of Town resources and would therefore have a minimal tax impact.

4.b. Increase the diversity and vibrancy of people and activities downtown.

The Housing Overlay Option Plan (HOOP) establishes a regulatory framework for downtown residences that involves the inclusion of affordable housing. Other frameworks may be needed to encourage mixed-use developments that will increase the diversity of uses in Natick Center. A mixed-use development may combine street-level retail and restaurant or entertainment uses, with upper floor offices, residential or affordable residential uses. Natick may be able to learn from the experience of nearby towns in the development of these alternative frameworks.

A diversity of uses can bring stability to an area. As business cycles change in one type of use, other uses may be on different parts of their cycles, preserving a degree of stability in the overall area.

Activity	Cost Category	Est.Cost/ Avg.Hhld./ Year	Assumptions
1. Encourage planned mixed-use development in Natick Center including residential, affordable residential, retail, office, restaurant, pub and entertainment uses.	A	\$0	These changes would be implemented through changes to zoning regulations.
2. Create alternative zoning options to encouraging new businesses and keep small businesses in Natick Center.	A	\$0	These changes would be implemented through changes to zoning regulations.

4.c. Increase economic development in Natick Center.

Natick Center functions because of its balance of “anchor tenants” of government and regional finance, and its intersection of transportation arteries, including the commuter rail station. Lack of investment can cause it to decline. The Town government could provide a spark for new investment in Natick Center by pursuing economic development activities to bring in new businesses, consistent with the character of the area, and particularly those that complement the emerging downtown arts and culture center. Economic development resources may enable private investment in a parking solution for Natick Center.

These economic development activities would begin with marketing, to let people and businesses know that Natick is a destination for people interested in arts and culture. With marketing in place, Natick could directly recruit new businesses to the area, to round out the arts and culture experience, and increase the vibrancy of Natick Center, day and night.

Natick currently has no institution of higher education. By recruiting one, from either the public or the private sector, opportunities for education and career improvement would be available for students of all ages. An institution of higher education can be a significant driver of economic development.

Activity	Cost Category	Est.Cost/ Avg.Hhld./ Year	Assumptions
1. Market Natick Center as a destination for arts and culture in the MetroWest region [joint public/private activity].	C	\$10-\$74	This would require hiring staff in the Community Development Office.
2. Recruit businesses to locate in Natick that bring a mix of jobs at various levels, provide products and services for use by Natick Center residents and workers, or complement the emerging arts and culture cluster.	C	\$10-\$74	This would require hiring staff in the Community Development Office.
3. Recruit an institution of higher education to locate in Natick, such as University of Massachusetts, or private institutions, such as University of Phoenix or Western New England College.	C	\$10-\$74	This would require hiring staff in the Community Development Office.

5. Improving the Town's Infrastructure and Transportation Options

Introduction

Natick is in many ways a cross-roads community, with an Interstate exit (Mass Pike exit 13), Rte. 9 bisecting the community, and six arterial roadways (east-west Rtes. 30, 135 and 16, and north-south Speen St., Rte. 27 and Oak St.), along with two stations for the commuter rail link to Boston. As the Town strives for interconnectedness among its citizen, it must address the ability to get around the Town in a safe and efficient manner.

Current Situation

Traffic has been a frequent complaint by *Natick 360* participants. Traffic barely moves through the two-lane arterials during rush periods. Natick has more workers commuting into it than out, so rush periods are long, covering both Boston commuters and workers along Rte. 9. Arterials are regularly clogged from 3:00 until well after 7:00 p.m., and collector streets—Walnut, Bacon, Union, Pond and others—are congested with drivers avoiding the arterials. Congested streets become barriers that split neighborhoods.

Other transportation modes, such as bicycles, are precluded by the narrow streets. Hourly busses, serving seniors' local medical and shopping needs, provide transit within Natick, and van service is available for people with disabilities. Shuttles move commuters between the downtown train station and major employers. Natick recently joined the MetroWest Regional Transportation Authority, which promises better bus service to more locations.

School traffic contributes to rush-period congestion. Busses serve school children for a fee. Parents may choose to drive their children to school to avoid bus fees or because they feel there are no safe walking/biking routes to the school.

Natick's two train stations put more riders on the Worcester-Boston line than any other community on that line. The Natick Center station is not accessible to people with disabilities, and Natick has no park-and-ride service. Parking for commuters is very limited at both the West Natick and Natick Center stations.

In other areas of infrastructure, Natick is developing plans to build a senior/community center, to replace a very old facility that is not serving the needs of the community. Natick is also negotiating to acquire land for a "Rail Trail," just over a mile long, to connect Cochituate State Park, Natick Mall and Natick Center.

Natick's budget constraints have caused the Town to reduce its maintenance budget, funding only the highest-priority needs. As a result, new capital spending has been all but eliminated and maintenance of existing facilities is not fully funded.

Issues, Gaps and Barriers to Achieving the Vision

Interconnectedness, a value identified in the Vision and Value statements, is provided by accessible streets, bike lanes, trails and paths, sidewalks, transit and other modes of linking areas of town internally and with each other. Natick has opportunities to make major improvements in each of these modes.

Solutions to many of Natick's transportation issues are not entirely with control of the Town. The State has jurisdiction over the Mass Pike and Rtes. 9, 16, 27, and 30. As a toll road, the Mass Pike diverts through-traffic onto Rte. 9, which is inadequate for the traffic that uses it. Intersection designs along the arterials generally do not have left- and right-turn pockets, and left turns are allowed everywhere all the time, so traffic is choked at several key points. Similarly, MBTA has jurisdiction over the commuter rail system and much-needed improvements.

Natick's budgetary squeeze, caused by the revenue-limiting Proposition 2½ and cost increases related to population growth, health care and inflation, has focused attention on the core education and public safety functions, leaving transportation improvements, capital investments and maintenance at lower priority levels. Unfortunately, cutting maintenance results in faster depreciation of capital assets and higher costs in the long run.

Regional solutions to some of these issues are starting to emerge with the MetroWest RTA. Good solutions require all the nearby towns to work together, but there is no strong regional structure and each town has unique needs not necessarily shared by the others, making consistent solutions elusive.

Strategies

To increase interconnectedness for Natick's citizens and to enhance flexibility and accessibility, the Town might consider six key strategies:

- Improve transportation options to get people out of cars and into shoes, bikes, busses and trains.
- Improve traffic flows on major routes, eliminating Mass Pike tolls, improving Rte. 9, and implementing traffic management projects along the arterials.
- Improve pedestrian access with more sidewalks and a walkway across Rte. 9.
- Build a senior/community center in Natick Center.
- Build the Rail Trail from Cochituate State Park to Natick Center.
- Improve the management of Town capital investments and maintain them.

Effects

Implementing these strategies could relieve a frequently cited complaint among Natick residents. This relief would last several years, particularly if a cultural change, to reduce car trips and rely more on transit, biking and walking, takes hold. These improvements take time, however, as agencies accumulate funds to implement them in phases over several years.

Building a senior/community center would fill a need in the Town that has been recognized for many years, improving the quality of life for seniors, and providing the community with meeting spaces and places to congregate.

These strategies would also establish a clear Town policy regarding priorities for capital investments and asset maintenance, to improve the effective use of Town funds.

5.a. Improve transportation options.

A key to solving Natick's transportation problems is to get people out of their cars and into alternatives, such as busses, trains, bikes and shoes. In the long run, a cultural change to reduce dependence on cars, and to rely on alternatives instead, will keep Natick accessible to everyone.

Many of these activities are outside of Natick's direct control, as they are under state, MBTA or MetroWest RTA jurisdiction. Nevertheless, Natick could work with these agencies to fund priorities that represent a community-wide—or even regional—consensus. Other activities are within Natick's jurisdiction, such as requiring bike lanes on new streets, or as major streets are improved.

Activity	Cost Category	Est.Cost/ Avg.Hhld./ Year	Assumptions
1. Join with other towns and the regional business community to request state government support for improving traffic and public transportation.	A	\$0	This is a lobbying effort to work with others to influence state investments.
2. Work with the MetroWest RTA to create bus service along Oak St., Speen St., and Rtes. 9, 16, 27, 30 and 135, for use the public.	C	\$10-\$74	This will vary depending on the structure of the RTA and the priorities established.
3. Require bike lanes be specified whenever new major streets are accepted, or existing major streets are improved.	D	>\$74	This would require a change in regulations and significant capital investment to add bike lanes to existing accepted roadways.
4. Dedicate bike lanes on major roads, widening roads where necessary to accommodate bike lanes.	D	>\$74	Work required to widen roads will be expensive and time consuming since negotiation with private property owners may be required to expand the right of way.
5. Encourage MBTA to increase the frequency of train service.	A	\$0	This is a lobbying effort to work with others to influence state investments.
6. Encourage MBTA to: expand peak-time shuttles between commuter train stations and major employers; extend service to satellite parking sites in Sherborn, Wayland and other parts of Natick.	A	\$0	This is a lobbying effort to work with others to influence state investments.
7. Encourage MBTA to build bike sheds at Natick train stations.	A	\$0	This is a lobbying effort to work with others to influence state investments.

Activity	Cost Category	Est.Cost/ Avg.Hhld./ Year	Assumptions
8. Encourage MBTA to make Natick Center train station accessible to people with disabilities.	A	\$0	This is a lobbying effort to work with others to influence state investments.
9. Encourage the MBTA to build a parking garage at West Natick Station.	A	\$0	This is a lobbying effort to work with others to influence state investments.

5.b. Improve traffic flows on major routes.

Autos will remain a primary transportation mode for the foreseeable future, regardless of strategies to reduce auto dependence. Addressing traffic congestion will therefore remain a priority for Natick.

Rte. 9 presents a unique set of issues beyond the scope of Natick's authority, but heavily impacting the quality of life in Natick. Solutions to these issues would require regional engagement with the state and other towns that neighbor Natick and suffer similar Rte. 9-based problems.

The Town is responsible for road maintenance and potholes on Town streets, as well as other public works improvements along them. Some roads in the community are maintained by the state. Because many state and local organizations are involved in this work, the different departments do not always coordinate their efforts, sometimes restricting traffic flows on all north-south or all east-west arteries simultaneously. Better coordination would ensure that drivers have at least one through route to their destination.

Activity	Cost Category	Est. Cost/ Avg. Hhld./ Year	Assumptions
1. Complete and implement a Natick traffic design plan.	C	\$10-\$74	Would require the retention of a consulting firm.
2. Study and implement low-cost traffic management techniques on Speen St., Oak St. and Rtes. 16, 27, 30 and 135, such as left- and right-turn pockets at key intersections, longer green lights and prohibited left turns during peak hours.	D	>\$74	Would require the retention of a consulting firm. To implement the suggestions made by the firm may require a significant capital investment.
3. Engage the State, Wellesley and Framingham in regional solutions for Rte. 9	A	\$0	This is a lobbying effort to work with others to influence state investments.
4. Encourage the State to eliminate tolls on the Mass Pike, to relieve traffic on Rte. 9.	A	\$0	This is a lobbying effort to work with others to influence state investments.
5. Rebuild Oak St. and Rte. 9 intersection to improve traffic flow.	A	\$0	This is a lobbying effort to work with others to influence state investments.
6. Rebuild Rte. 27 and Rte. 9 intersection to improve traffic flow.	A	\$0	This is a lobbying effort to work with others to influence state investments.
7. Improve major roadway maintenance: fill potholes quickly; smooth-over pavement cuts.	C	\$10-\$74	Would require the addition of staff to the DPW highways division.
8. Coordinate road work to ensure that at least one major north-south artery, and one major east-west artery, is open at all times.	A	\$0	This is a lobbying effort to work with others to influence state investments.

5.c. Improve pedestrian access.

Sidewalks increase a neighborhood's sense of community, and are often associated with lower crime rates as more people are outdoors with watchful eyes. They can also reduce traffic, by providing children a way to walk to school, even if escorted by parents.

A pedestrian way could reduce the complex auto trip between Sherwood Plaza and Natick Mall. They are separated by Rte. 9, but moving from the Mall to the Plaza requires using the underpass connecting Natick Mall Rd. and Dean Rd., as Speen St. does not provide access into the Plaza from the east. From the Plaza to the Mall, a driver must either use the underpass or navigate the Speen St. "beetle-back" intersection. A pedestrian overpass would enhance the success of both centers.

Activity	Cost Category	Est.Cost/ Avg.Hhld./ Year	Assumptions
1. Require sidewalks be installed whenever new streets accepted or existing streets are improved.	C	\$10-\$74	Sidewalks are more expensive than roadways to build. Working with individual property owners is very time consuming.
2. Ensure that each arterial and major road has at least one ADA-compliant sidewalk.	C	\$10-\$74	Sidewalks are more expensive than roadways to build. Working with individual property owners is very time consuming.
3. Ensure sidewalk access is available on key routes linking neighborhoods and schools.	C	\$10-\$74	Sidewalks are more expensive than roadways to build. Working with individual property owners is very time consuming.
4. Link Sherwood Plaza to Natick Mall with a pedestrian bridge across Rte. 9.	A	\$0	This is a lobbying effort to work with others to influence state investments.

5.d. Build a senior/community center in Natick Center.

Natick has been planning a senior/community center for several years. The Senior Center Study Committee has developed specifics, including usage requirements, architectural concept plans and cost estimates. A debt exclusion override would need to go in front of voters to fund this initiative.

This facility would be larger and provide for more diverse and extensive uses than the current senior center. Consequently, its longer-term operation and maintenance costs may be greater than those currently budgeted for the existing senior center.

Activity	Cost Category	Est.Cost/ Avg.Hhld./ Year	Assumptions
1. Construct a new senior/community center in Natick Center, financed by a bond override.	D	>\$74	This will be a large capital investment requiring a debt exclusion override. The per-household costs will be considerably higher than \$74.

5.e. Build the Rail Trail connecting Cochituate State Park and Natick Center.

The potential for a “Rail Trail” to connect Cochituate State Park, Natick Mall and Natick Center has been the focus of much discussion recently. The Cochituate Rail Trail Study Committee has been organized and information is being gathered to support any potential future negotiations with CSX Corp. (www.csx.com), the current landowner.

The Rail Trail would allow people in new residential developments by Natick Mall to walk safely, just over a mile, to Natick Center and the commuter rail line, restaurants, arts and culture amenities, and local businesses there. Along the way are Lake Cochituate, Natick Labs, major Rte. 9 employers, Pegan Cove Park and other sights and destinations. In a greater plan, parking would be available at both ends, and at key public access points along the ultimate 4-mile rail trail, linked to three additional miles of trails.

The Rail Trail anticipates developing a hiking and biking path along the entire length. A key to success—based on the experience of other U.S. rail trails—will be providing public access points along the way.

Activity	Cost Category	Est.Cost/ Avg.Hhld./ Year	Assumptions
1. Build the Rail Trail connecting Cochituate State Park and Natick Center.	D	>\$74	Funding for the rail trail may come from many different sources including Natick Mall mitigation funds and federal funds. However, the town’s investment to acquire, design, develop, and maintain the rail trail will still be large.

5.f. Improve the management of Town capital investments.

Budgetary constraints have led the Town to prioritize maintenance expenses to only the most-important items, delaying other needed maintenance activities. In some cases this approach may lead to faster depreciation of the Town's capital assets, and cost more in the long run to ensure the facilities perform to standards. By adopting a more aggressive maintenance strategy, the Town would be establishing a policy to ensure that appropriate maintenance funds are allocated to avoid this problem.

The Town also has a five-year capital plan, but identified needs are not fully funded. By updating this five-year capital plan, the Town would ensure that its capital investments reflect the best information available, and the priorities of all Departments and constituencies in the Town.

Activity	Cost Category	Est.Cost/ Avg.Hhld./ Year	Assumptions
1. Ensure that operating funds are available to maintain capital assets appropriately.	D	>\$74	The current estimate is that the town needs to spend an additional \$2.5-\$4.0 million per year to adequately maintain its infrastructure.
2. Update the five-year capital plan and Town-wide priorities.	A	\$0	This requires a consistent process for updating the capital plan and a system of funding the plan so that it is not perceived as a plan which sits on the shelf and is not utilized.

6. Planning for Change and Managing Growth

Introduction

Natick will change and grow over time. It is a highly-desirable area close to one of the most dynamic cities in the U.S. People from outside want to live in Natick, just as Natick residents want to live in Natick. The Town has good schools, championship teams, open spaces, low crime, moderate taxes and friendly people. It is close to world-class employers, and has a fairly easy commute to Boston. It has a growing arts and culture cluster, and lots of shopping. It's a great place to live! That is why it will change and grow. The trick is to keep the changes from endangering the things that make Natick a great place to live.

Current Situation

Developers want to build new homes in Natick because they know they can sell them for a good price. Natick's zoning plan has every parcel in Town zoned for use and level of intensity, and regulations address virtually every other aspect of development. Ideally developers will want to work with the Town to ensure that their development contributes to the Town's character, and does not disrupt the things that make Natick a great place to live and do business.

Because Natick does not have ten percent of its housing preserved as affordable, developers are free to propose new housing development under State chapter 40B. As long as the proposed 40B development includes at least 25 percent of the units as "affordable" the development is exempt from many of the town's land-use regulations. Many residents are upset about this lack of control. They fear the impact such development may have on town services and finances. Large-scale 40B developments are currently proposed for 2 sites along South Main Street.

Natick has a reputation as a leader in the MetroWest area, with leadership positions on regional committees, one of the first to join the MetroWest Regional Transit Authority, and a leader in citizen-participation strategic planning. Natick understands that it is not an island, but it is one element immersed in a host of issues affecting towns all over the region, such as Rte. 9 congestion, air pollution, employee benefits management, and regional resource sharing.

Issues, Gaps and Barriers to Achieving the Vision

Many residents see continued growth as a threat to Natick's "small-town" sense. At some point Natick ceases to be a small town and becomes a big town or a small city.

Even if growth can be managed, residents hate to see open areas, fields or forests lost to development. While the lands may be private and without preservation status, residents are used to seeing the land vacant, and experience a loss when new buildings break ground. Residents view new growth as generating more traffic and placing a burden on town resources.

Natick wants to continue and enhance its role as a regional leader, to bring more resources to bear on solving the issues it shares with its neighbors.

Strategies

Some of the things Natick might do to address change and growth management issues include:

- Plan proactively for growth, to get ahead of developers and take charge of the growth and development process.

- Educate the public about growth issues, to show where the Town can act and where it is powerless, and to engage more citizens in the development planning process.
- Encourage population diversity, by preserving senior ownership of their homes, and encouraging development of affordable housing and senior housing in appropriate areas.
- Investigate opportunities for regionalization, develop relationships, identify resources and share best practices.

Effects

By implementing these strategies, the Town might be able to exert more control over, or at least influence, the character of new developments. Citizens would be more familiar with the development process, and know when and how best to intervene when developers propose ideas that seem inappropriate. Natick's architectural heritage could be preserved, and seniors and people with low incomes would find appropriate housing more readily. Natick would re-energize its leadership role in regional organizations, and bring more resources and ideas to bear on issues affecting the Town and the region.

6.a. Plan proactively for growth.

By taking a more pro-active role, Natick may be able to further identify areas that are appropriate for a variety of functions and housing types and decrease the Town's vulnerability to inappropriate 40B development. The Town could increase the intensity and diversity of zoning on industrial park properties, to encourage mixed-use development and discourage additional development in open spaces. In some areas, smaller homes are being replaced by much larger homes that change the character of the neighborhood. Many citizens are unsure of this trend, and believe it should be studied to determine if regulation is needed. In many of Natick's older neighborhoods, preserving smaller lot sizes could provide the opportunity for the development of lower-cost "starter homes."

Activity	Cost Category	Est.Cost/ Avg.Hhld./ Year	Assumptions
1. Planning Board engage developers to create a blueprint for managing growth.	A	\$0	Most of the items in this group are individually small because they are regulation changes; however, if multiple items in this section are to be implemented at the same time, it would require the addition of staff in the Community Development office.
2. Enhance zoning in preferred development areas as alternatives to 40B projects.	A	\$0	Most of the items in this group are individually small because they are regulation changes; however, if multiple items in this section are to be implemented at the same time, it would require the addition of staff in the Community Development office.
3. Encourage use of industrial park properties for both business and housing development.	A	\$0	Most of the items in this group are individually small because they are regulation changes; however, if multiple items in this section are to be implemented at the same time, it would require the addition of staff in the Community Development office.
4. Evaluate the process of "mansionization" to determine if regulation is appropriate.	A	\$0	Most of the items in this group are individually small because they are regulation changes; however, if multiple items in this section are to be implemented at the same time, it would require the addition of staff in the Community Development office.
5. Re-zone older neighborhoods to allow smaller lot sizes consistent with existing properties.	A	\$0	Most of the items in this group are individually small because they are regulation changes; however, if multiple items in this section are to be implemented at the same time, it would require the addition of staff in the Community Development office.

6.b. Educate the public about growth issues.

The public is concerned about the scale and pace of new development in Natick, and expects the Town's leaders to take action to preserve existing neighborhoods. But in many cases, state law precludes the Town from taking action. By educating the public about the development process, and by engaging the public in land-use planning activities, residents will know how to intervene in the process in the most effective way.

Activity	Cost Category	Est.Cost/ Avg.Hhld./ Year	Assumptions
1. Conduct workshops on Massachusetts development law and Natick zoning bylaws to help the public understand the law and the Town's role in regulating growth and development.	A	\$0	Most of the items in this group are individually small because they are regulation changes; however, if multiple items in this section are to be implemented at the same time, it would require the addition of staff in the Community Development office.
2. Hold community-based planning exercises (charettes) to develop plans for areas that are appropriate and likely for development.	A	\$0	Most of the items in this group are individually small because they are regulation changes; however, if multiple items in this section are to be implemented at the same time, it would require the addition of staff in the Community Development office.

6.c. Encourage population diversity.

As new residents move into Natick, they may bid up the prices of older homes. As home values increase, so do tax assessments and taxes. Many seniors, and others on relatively fixed incomes, cannot afford the taxes on the homes where they have spent most of their lives. If they sell, they may not be able to find affordable and comfortable housing within the Town. One solution may be to allow these older homes to be subdivided to provide new housing opportunities and income to existing residents.

Lack of senior housing is a problem town-wide. Downtown is one potentially appropriate area for seniors, where they can more easily have most of their needs met.

An ultimate solution to the 40B development problem is to increase the supply of affordable housing in Natick. When ten percent of the housing stock is affordable, according to state law and standards, a town becomes exempt from the provisions of chapter 40B. Natick would need to see nearly 500 affordable units built to reach the ten percent threshold.

Activity	Cost Category	Est.Cost/ Avg.Hhld./ Year	Assumptions
1. Allow existing homes to apply to convert to two-family homes or condominiums	A	\$0	Most of the items in this group are individually small because they are regulation changes; however, if multiple items in this section are to be implemented at the same time, it would require the addition of staff in the Community Development office.
2. Develop senior housing downtown and around town	A	\$0	Most of the items in this group are individually small because they are regulation changes; however, if multiple items in this section are to be implemented at the same time, it would require the addition of staff in the Community Development office.
3. Develop sufficient affordable housing in appropriate areas to exempt the Town from Chapter 40B	A	\$0	Most of the items in this group are individually small because they are regulation changes; however, if multiple items in this section are to be implemented at the same time, it would require the addition of staff in the Community Development office.

6.d. Investigate opportunities for regionalization

As a leader in the MetroWest region, Natick has an opportunity to improve efficiency and bring more resources to bear on solutions to regional issues. Exploring improved cost-effectiveness through regionalization and economies of scale is worth investigating.

For example, some towns might share specialized equipment, rather than each Town spending for its own unit. Administration of employee and retire benefits on a regional or state basis could reduce costs and improve investment returns.

Continued participation in meetings between Natick officials and their counterparts in neighboring towns would strengthen the relationships among them, and help focus attention on regionalization opportunities.

Regional organizations may in some cases be better applicants for large grants, or they may be able to make Natick officials aware of grant opportunities they regularly monitor. Continued participation in these organizations could bring more resources to help address Natick's issues.

Activity	Cost Category	Est.Cost/ Avg.Hhld./ Year	Assumptions
1. Investigate instances where regionalization has been successfully implemented in other areas of the country, such as with Fire, Police, Public Works and Schools.	A	\$0	Most of the items in this group are individually small because they are regulation changes; however, if multiple items in this section are to be implemented at the same time, it would require the addition of staff in the Community Development office.
2. Conduct workshops with others town department heads to consider where equipment could be shared as opposed to purchasing new (inventories necessary).	A	\$0	Most of the items in this group are individually small because they are regulation changes; however, if multiple items in this section are to be implemented at the same time, it would require the addition of staff in the Community Development office.
3. Selectmen and Town Administration meet regularly with other Selectmen and Town Administrators within MetroWest to investigate methods of regionalizing wherever possible.	A	\$0	Most of the items in this group are individually small because they are regulation changes; however, if multiple items in this section are to be implemented at the same time, it would require the addition of staff in the Community Development office.

Activity	Cost Category	Est. Cost/ Avg. Hhld./ Year	Assumptions
4. Open a dialogue with the State, Metropolitan Area Planning Council and MetroWest Growth Management Committee to identify grants or incentives to assist with regionalization.	A	\$0	Most of the items in this group are individually small because they are regulation changes; however, if multiple items in this section are to be implemented at the same time, it would require the addition of staff in the Community Development office.

7. Town Financing Strategies

Introduction

Natick's budget, like other MetroWest towns', suffers from structural issues resulting from State laws and regulations. The situation is complex to understand and difficult to manage.

Current Situation

Like other Massachusetts towns, Natick's budget is squeezed between the State's revenue-limiting "Proposition 2½," and increasing costs to serve a growing population and to meet inflation in employee and retiree health care and other costs. In response, Town capital spending has been severely cut, budget reserves have become smaller, and services have been cut.

The economics of residential growth are complex, with different types of development providing different tax revenue and demanding different resources. Businesses pay property taxes, but they do not use many Town services, so they are frequently a net financial plus for the Town.

Natick's budget—like any \$100 million organization—is complex. Operating expenses are separate from capital outlays. Different funds have different rules. The Town has long-term bond obligations and multi-year contract obligations. Grants may pay for a function for a year or so; after the grant expires, either the function is cut or the Town absorbs the expense.

Natick's property tax revenue depends on local economic cycles. The Town gets state aid to local governments and state aid to education but the aid is often inadequate and unpredictable. State law currently does not allow Natick to generate revenues through local taxes.

Any organization can improve its efficiency and effectiveness, and Natick works hard to economize wherever possible. After more than 20 years of Proposition 2½, local government is very cost-efficient and attempts to implement innovative approaches are often constrained or complicated by state law and regulation.

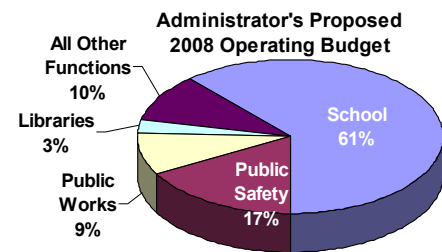
Issues, Gaps and Barriers to Achieving the Vision

Residents clearly associate their high quality of life with the services that the Town provides; without those services, Natick would be a less-desirable place to live. But all of these services cost money, and while efficiencies can be found in any organization, costs are still rising faster than revenues.

Premier among Natick's services is its very good public school system. The schools account for over 60 percent of the Town's operating budget.

The next-biggest piece of the budget pie is public safety: Police, Fire and Emergency Medical Services, with over one-sixth of the operating budget.

The third-largest piece is Public Works, including streets and other infrastructure, facility repair and maintenance, trash and recycling collection, storm water runoff management and snow removal. It uses nearly 10 percent of the operating budget.



The Libraries use three percent of the operating budget. The remaining, 10 percent of the operating budget includes programs such as Recreation and Parks, and Senior Services. Also in the remainder is Town Administration, including the Town Clerk and staff, Community Development (planning and zoning), Environmental Compliance, Human Resources and a few others.

Nearly 300 volunteers are members of Town Meeting, or sit on boards and committees, and most have a voice in setting Town policy and developing budgets.

Strategies

Approaches that the Town might take to address these issues include:

- Improve the budget process: make it easier to understand and give it more discussion time.
- Improve the capital planning and budgeting process: update the capital plan.
- Increase the Town's operational efficiency; implement economies wherever possible.
- Expand the Town's tax base: foster new businesses and recruit existing ones.
- Work to change State tax policies and formulas that squeeze town finances statewide.

Effects

By implementing these strategies, Natick might gain some measure of additional control over its finances. More informed public discussion would improve decision-making. More efficiency would save money. New businesses would add taxes with little expense burden. In the longer run, a different set of state regulations could give the Town more revenue sources and more authority to manage its own financial future.

7.a. Improve the budget process.

A simpler and more understandable budget document would help residents understand Natick's budget better, and foster more-informed discussion of key issues. Consistent budget policies across all departments would also make the budget easier to read and manage. Earlier production of a budget—consistent with the Town Charter and Bylaws—would give the public more time to discuss and absorb the issues. A truer picture of the Town's financial condition would result from better accounting for grants and “non-appropriated” revenues, and from longer-term budget projections.

Natick's budget is “cost-based;” that is, it focuses on what things cost, and how to ensure that costs do not exceed revenues. It is not “performance-based;” that is, it does not focus on the results the Town produces with residents' tax money. Performance budgeting is rare among town governments, but it is an approach that could refocus the discussion around the value the Town generates, rather than on the cost of individual objects of expense.

Activity	Cost Category	Est.Cost/ Avg.Hhld./ Year	Assumptions
1. Publish and distribute a simplified budget report, providing residents with clear and readable information about: the relationships between services and taxes; how revenues are spent; limits on discretionary spending; cost of public services and capital outlays; state aid; impact mitigation funds; revenue alternatives; changes in revenues and expenses over time.	A	\$0	This effort will require extensive changes to existing reports and processes but would not require additional staff or resources.
2. After consulting with other boards and committees, the Board of Selectmen set annual policies for developing the baseline budget proposal to Town Meeting, addressing capital outlays, uses of grants, uses of overrides, union contracts, changes in service levels, etc.	A	\$0	This effort will require changes to existing reports and processes but would not require additional staff or resources.
3. Start the budget process earlier, allowing more time for public discussion.	A	\$0	This effort will require changes to existing reports and processes but would not require additional staff or resources.
4. Show all revenues and expenditures, including grants and non-appropriated revenues.	A	\$0	This effort will require changes to existing reports and processes but would not require additional staff or resources.

Activity	Cost Category	Est.Cost/ Avg.Hhld./ Year	Assumptions
5. Incorporate three-year revenue and expense forecasts into the annual budget.	A	\$0	This effort will require changes to existing reports and processes but would not require additional staff or resources.
6. Link changes in the budget to changes in outcome-based performance measures, where appropriate.	A	\$0	This effort will require changes to existing reports and processes but would not require additional staff or resources.

7.b. Improve the capital planning and budgeting process.

The Town's financial condition affects how much it can borrow for big capital purchases, such as a fire truck, a street paver, or new buildings for a school, senior center, parking garage or fire station. The Town's five-year capital budget guides decisions.

Activity	Cost Category	Est.Cost/ Avg.Hhld./ Year	Assumptions
1. Improve the capital planning and budgeting process.	A	\$0	This effort will require changes to existing reports and processes but would not require additional staff or resources.
2. Update the Town's capital budget.	A	\$0	This effort will require changes to existing reports and processes but would not require additional staff or resources.

7.c. Increase the Town's operational efficiency

Natick is always on the lookout for ways to save money. Some potential savings are listed here, but many of them affect different constituencies and raise policy issues. Outsourcing or privatization sometimes saves money, but may lessen the Town's control over the functions. The Group Insurance Commission would improve health insurance costs, but currently requires approval of employee groups; legislation is needed to break the deadlock. Natick's pension fund is among the poorest performers, but gaining approval to transfer to the PRIT is unlikely without State legislation. Transferring retirees from Town health insurance to Medicare would save significant money, but may not be supported by the Town's retired municipal employees.

Other towns face many of the same issues that Natick faces today. By working more closely with officials in other towns, Natick might be able to identify money-saving tips and encourage changes to state laws and regulations that limit innovation and efficiencies.

Currently, each department writes its own grant applications. When awarded, these grants may be considered "non-appropriated" funds, and do not require analysis by the Finance Committee or appropriation by Town Meeting. When a grant expires, the Town's operating budget frequently absorbs the cost previously paid by the grant. By centralizing grants coordination, the Town would gain a measure of control over grants, to make sure they do not burden the Town in the longer run.

Activity	Cost Category	Est.Cost/ Avg.Hhld./ Year	Assumptions
1. Review all Town services for potential costs and benefits of outsourcing or privatization.	A	\$0	While the Town staff are always looking for cost-savings, this would allocate more staff time toward looking at outsourcing efficiencies.
2. Continue to support State legislation allowing Natick to join the Group Insurance Commission without coalition bargaining, to get better Town employee health insurance rates and assistance with cost containment.	A	\$0	This is a lobbying effort to work with others to influence state legislation.
3. Continue to support State legislation requiring underperforming funds to join the state Pension Reserves Investment Trust (PRIT) fund, to increase investment returns and reduce administrative costs.	A	\$0	This is a lobbying effort to work with others to influence state legislation.
4. Continue to participate in the 14-town insurance collaborative for health, workers compensation and liability insurance.	A	\$0	This is current practice.

Activity	Cost Category	Est.Cost/ Avg.Hhld./ Year	Assumptions
5. Continue to participate in the State purchasing list for low commodity prices.	A	\$0	This is current practice.
6. Change health insurance coverage for eligible retired Town employees from the Town health insurance program to Medicare.	A	\$0	This effort must be approached carefully to avoid negative impact on retirees. To implement will require negotiation with retired municipal employees.
7. Meet with other towns to share best practices and creative solutions to issues.	A	\$0	This effort will require changes to existing reports and processes but would not require additional staff or resources.
8. Establish a new position for a grant-writer and coordinator, to increase desirable foundation, state and federal grants Town-wide.	C	\$10-\$74	This would require the addition of a staff person.

7.d. Expand the Town's tax base

Businesses pay property taxes on real estate, either directly or through their landlord. They also pay property taxes on their equipment and inventory. But businesses do not use much of the Town's services, other than police and fire protection, so they are frequently net contributors to the Town's budget.

Recruiting businesses to Natick, particularly those businesses that will contribute to Natick Center's emerging arts and culture cluster, would not only improve the budget situation, but would also bring a mix of jobs. New businesses should also value Natick's environment and natural resources as Natick residents do.

The Town might also find business incubator partners that would help foster development of start-up businesses. Natick has office space available for such ventures.

One key to developing the Natick economy with minimal environmental impact may be to promote "smart growth," a development approach that clusters mixed-use developments in the downtown area and in small "mini-cores" scattered around the Town. The mixed-use developments would feature residential development, including high-density housing, together with local retail and local office uses.

Activity	Cost Category	Est.Cost/ Avg.Hhld./ Year	Assumptions
1. Actively recruit businesses to locate in Natick that bring a mix of jobs at various levels with a low environmental impact.	C	\$10-\$74	This would require the addition of staff to the Community Development Office.
2. Identify partners that will foster the development of new start-up businesses	A	\$0	This could be accomplished with existing resources.
3. Promote smart growth and mixed use development.	A	\$0	This could be accomplished with existing resources.

7.e. Work to change State tax policies and formulas

Natick's long-term budget difficulties are affected by state laws and regulations that constrain creativity and problem-solving at the local level. A long-term solution may be to change these rules. For example, the state mandates educational curricula, but does not fully fund its mandate.

Proposition 2½ treats all communities the same, even though they have different conditions and needs. For a town that is growing rapidly, and where residential growth does not pay for itself, basic services to residents eventually become impossible to deliver fully. One solution might be to request more state aid to towns meeting those conditions.

Alternatively, the state could provide growing towns the authority to opt for new types of local taxes, such as on meals, hotels or sales, without having to dip into state coffers.

Activity	Cost Category	Est.Cost/ Avg.Hhld./ Year	Assumptions
1. Request the State Government to allocate more funds for aid to education.	A	\$0	This is a lobbying effort to work with others to influence state legislation.
2. Request the State Legislature to allocate more local government aid to communities experiencing higher rates of growth, such as Natick.	A	\$0	This is a lobbying effort to work with others to influence state legislation.
3. Request the Legislature to grant towns new optional sources of revenue, such as meals tax, hotel/motel tax, or sales tax.	A	\$0	This is a lobbying effort to work with others to influence state legislation.

Balancing the Town Budget

As described in the beginning of this document, options for balancing the Town budget are few. State law prohibits increasing property tax revenues more than 2.5% per year without an “override” vote of the public. State law prohibits towns from enacting other types of taxes, such as income tax, sales tax, or taxes on meals or hotels. Meanwhile, inflation and rising employee health insurance and retirement system costs push expenditures to grow more than 2.5% each year.

So far, Natick has kept its budget in balance by: (a) cutting capital spending, (b) reducing reserves, or savings accounts by using these one-time funding sources to fund on-going operations; (c) cutting staff; (d) using “mitigation” money provided by the Natick Mall and other developers to offset the increased costs they bring to the community; and (e) reducing Town services.

With virtually no more capital spending left to cut and with Town reserves largely depleted, Natick will soon join other communities in the Commonwealth who will need to resort to repeated operating overrides, scheduled at regular intervals, if it is going to continue to deliver services that the community currently enjoys.

Thus, the citizens of Natick face the basic alternatives of either (a) voting an override to raise property taxes, or (b) reducing Town services, or (c) a little of both. The decision about what options to pursue is up to our elected officials. They have asked that we gather some information to get a sense of the community on the issue of an operating override.

Please take a moment to think about the following questions and give us your response. This is not a binding vote – it is merely information that is being gathered to inform your elected officials.

☐ I would rather cut Town services than increase property taxes.

OR

☐ I would rather increase property taxes than cut Town services.

OR

☐ I would rather cut some Town services and increase property taxes somewhat (please circle the balance you feel would be appropriate):

